

# Past:present represent. Imaging dis:connected Mediterranean bodies

Hanni Geiger

*Italy chooses the past* headlined the *Frankfurter Allgemeine* newspaper in February 2013, shortly after the Milan Fashion Week.<sup>1</sup> It was referring to the colourful and pompous Dolce & Gabbana Spring/Summer Collection, significantly titled *Italianità*: the designers' homage to the 'old values' of the crisis-ridden European country on the Mediterranean.<sup>2</sup> The PR campaign celebrated the stereotype of *dolce vita* in various photographs and glorified tradition and its revival. *Buon cibo, café* and *vino*, luxurious craftsmanship and materials of the highest quality, a southern Italian landscape flanked by well-dressed people in a cheerful mood against a sunny seaside backdrop – imagined, constructed and narrated from the nation's own perspective.

In one of the following campaigns, too, the timelessness of the 'Italian lifestyle' characterised the designs of both clothes and people. Under the title *Italia is Love* (2016), the designers gathered all conceivable set pieces thought to represent an Italian maritime *passata quotidianità*,<sup>3</sup> referring to a Eurocentric Mediterranean image of everyday life that transposes a one-sided version of its past into the global present. The particular asymmetry of past and

#### Hanni Geiger

is a postdoctoral researcher at *global dis:connect*, where she is investigating the globalised Mediterranean through 'dis:connective design' – a design of absences, detours and ruptures that challenges Western design principles and the prevailing Eurocentric constructions of the region.

Her work focuses on the art of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, global design histories, the interdependencies of migration and artistic production as well as digital images and posthumanism.

1 Alfons Kaiser, 'Italien wählt Die Vergangenheit', *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 26 February 2013, <https://www.faz.net/aktuell/stil/mode-design/mode/mailaender-modewoche-italien-waehlt-die-vergangenheit-12095449.html>.

2 'Colourful Dolce & Gabbana Spring / Summer 2013 Ad Campaign', Global Fashion Report, 2013, <https://globalfashionreport.com/colourful-dolce-gabbana-spring-summer-2013-ad-campaign-photos>.

3 'Italia Is Love. CAMPAGNA PUBBLICITARIA ESTATE 2016', *Italia is Love*, 2016, <https://world.dolcegabbana.com/it/discover/dolce-gabbana-estate-2016-italia-is-love-ispirazione-campagna-pubblicitaria>.



present on the Mediterranean is evident in the distinctly staged and narrated embodiments and (image) practices from a solely Western gaze.

Against the backdrop of globalisation's multidimensionality and complexity, the images reveal marginalised bodies, relativise proximity and distance and disrupt a supposedly universal narrative, thus showing the Mediterranean from its socially, politically and economically dis:connective side.

## Visible invisibilities

The highly controversial title of Dolce & Gabbana's Spring/Summer Collection 2013 *Italianità*, that is 'Italianity' or 'being Italian' can be traced back to the pan-Italian movement in the nineteenth century and nationalist ideologies of the twentieth century.<sup>4</sup> These tendencies were associated with the forced Italianisation and the formation of a large Italian state, silencing voices on the east and south of the Mediterranean.<sup>5</sup> Under this colonial policy, the term stood for a unified identity comprehending the essence, nature and character of the country

<sup>4</sup> Gualtiero Boaglio, *Italianità. Eine Begriffsgeschichte* (Wien: Praesens Verlag, 2008).

<sup>5</sup> Boaglio.

Fig. 01  
Dolce & Gabbana, Spring/Summer Advertising Campaign 2013.  
In: Dolce & Gabbana. 2013. „Spring/Summer Advertising Campaign 2013.“  
Maria Speaks Prada, January 16, 2013.  
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and its inhabitants<sup>6</sup> in their formative linguistic, cultural and political dominance in the region.

However, this repressive part of Italian history is largely hidden behind the images of Dolce & Gabbana's press campaign, which circumscribes this problematic term in marketing and everyday life. Since the 1950s *Italianità* has stood for a broadly applicable Mediterranean culture of ease, 'sea, sun and love', familiar since the tourism boom and the labour migrations from Italy to the European north.<sup>7</sup> So what the designers present to us is a red-and-white fishing boat on a Sicilian beach, with attractive women and men draped in front of it, models as well as amateurs from the area, who are indulging in sunbathing and serene togetherness. Amongst other model-stars, we recognise celebrities, such as Monica Bellucci – Italian acting icon and global epitome of the dark-haired, pale-skinned 'Mediterranean beauty'.<sup>8</sup> Fabricating a universally valid maritime imaginary, these sensual bodies in classic, tight-fitting dresses in vivid colours, patterns and ornamentation against a deep blue seascape recall the formation of a Mediterranean topos that was dominated by Italy's imperial politics in the 1930s<sup>9</sup> and the entertainment industry in the 1950s and 1960s. Design has always played a major role here. The industrialised states on the Mediterranean shaped their colonies in the region and around the globe by strategically disseminating their own brands, such as Fiat or Vespa, which featured in movies, billboards and ads.<sup>10</sup>

Even today, Dolce & Gabbana design the single valid Mediterranean universe based on a Eurocentric selection of bodies dressed up in Italy's glorified (design) past. To this day, design testifies to power and claims on territories and people, substantiating them with Western narratives. As a child of industrialisation, design follows capitalist and post-imperial principles, thus reflecting the region's dis:connectivity in its economic and social imbalances.

These and other visual representations of a unified Mediterranean under Western control go hand in hand with its theoretical constructions, which mostly draw on its past as a European model of civilisation that can still be felt today. Concepts of a romanticised *Méditerranée* or *Mediterraneità* influenced by the imperial and, later, fascist regimes played leading roles as both

<sup>6</sup> Boaglio.

<sup>7</sup> 'Italianità in Der Schweiz – Caffè, Vespa oder Bagnino: Sechs Schweizer Fotografen mit Italienischem Blut zeigen, was bei Ihnen Heimatgefühle Auslöst', *Migros-Magazin* 32 (3 August 2015): 26-31.

<sup>8</sup> 'Monica Bellucci, Il Make up Dell'icona Di Bellezza Mediterranea', *LetteraF*, 30 September 2014, <https://www.letteraf.com/monica-bellucci-make-dell'icona-bellezza-mediterranea>.

<sup>9</sup> Vera S. Bader, 'Als die Moderne noch geholfen hat', *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 10 July 2017.

<sup>10</sup> Anthony Downey, ed., *Dissonant Archives: Contemporary Visual Culture and Contested Narratives in the Middle East* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2015), 242.





abstract ideas of colonial dominance and of unification strategies that also imposed themselves aesthetically.<sup>11</sup>

In its production, dissemination and narrativisation, the photo from Dolce & Gabbana's press campaign inevitably reveals what should remain hidden: the many layers of unacknowledged histories that have shaped and continue to shape the Occidental frame. The one-sidedness resulting from the Western gaze turned on itself must therefore be understood as the practice of hegemonic knowledge production that is always accompanied by the disconnective absence of other images and (body) narratives.

## The ir:regular Mediterranean

The inevitability of apprehending the globalised Mediterranean with its bodies in anything but universal terms becomes evident in the social, political and economic dis:connectivity of the region and its people. The wars in south-eastern Europe in the 1990s, the Arab Spring, migrations from Africa and the so-

<sup>11</sup> Andreas Eckl, 'Méditerranée? Mediterranistische Diskurse um Mittelmeerwelten und -räume aus forschungsgeschichtlicher Perspektive', in *New Horizons. Mediterranean Research in the 21st Century*, ed. Mihran Dabag et al., Mittelmeerstudien 10 (Paderborn: Wilhelm Fink, 2016), 109; Michelangelo Sabatino, 'The Politics of Mediterraneanità in Italian Modernist Architecture', in *Modern Architecture and the Mediterranean. Vernacular Dialogues and Contested Identities*, ed. Jean-Francois Lejeune and Michelangelo Sabatino (London: Routledge, 2010), 41–63.

Fig. 02  
Hannah Wallace Bowman,  
Migrant Boat off the Sicilian Coast,  
August 2020, Photograph, <https://www.msf.org/five-things-know-about-search-and-rescue-crisis>.

called 'Balkan route' travelled by refugees, which runs through countries along the Mediterranean, represent the errors, frictions, deviations and disorder of multiple Mediterranean realities. The press photographs of refugees off the same Italian coast where Dolce & Gabbana staged their campaign illustrate these dis:connectivities.

Although the photographs of Libyan migrants are subject to other practices and contexts than in design, they are shot from the same Eurocentric perspective, disseminated and narrativised through the media, threatening a Mediterranean attributed exclusively to Western nation-states. In contrast to the expensively outfitted and digitally altered white bodies of an economic elite from the global North, the news images of the unembellished dark bodies breaking out from the southern shores of the region represent a disruption and destabilisation of hegemonic beliefs as they diffuse throughout the internet. The bodies marked by the arduous flight merge into one undifferentiated mass of otherness without individual dignity. Uniformed in orange life jackets on a roaring dark sea, the bodies made alien threaten the geo-political, cultural, linguistic and religious borders that demarcate Europe. These bodies do not always reach the Northern beach staged in fashion advertising alive.

The disconnective side of globalisation finds expression here. The sea, naturally fluid and moving but which law renders frozen and static, becomes the dividing wall behind which the imperial past and its excluded masses lie buried.<sup>12</sup> With the immigration of the disconnected bodies marked as illegal, the ghosts of the colonial *mare nostrum* are awakened, against which only a politically practised selection of bodies seems effective.

Accordingly, Dolce & Gabbana's summer 2016 collection – ironically presented shortly after the first reports of migrant boats sinking off the Italian coast – celebrates *Italianità*, this time under the motto *amore*.<sup>13</sup> A love that, as the campaign reveals, is only granted to the privileged migrating bodies of the shopping and consumption-hungry '[...] foreign tourists, who have landed in their much-loved Italy [...]'.<sup>14</sup> Belonging coincides with the exclusion of uninvited guests and their bodies, bodies carrying not only the past, but the colonial constitution of the Mediterranean present.<sup>15</sup> These disturbing bodies are never to be declared problems of the

<sup>12</sup> *Imagaries of Europe. Rethinking Identity, Belonging and Sovereignty Europe: From Hope to Disaffection* (Barcelona, 2018), <https://www.cccb.org/en/multimedia/videos/imaginaries-of-europe-rethinking-identity-belonging-and-sovereignty/229536>.

<sup>13</sup> Hannah Marriott, 'Dolce & Gabbana Shares the Amore in Milan with Jolly 50s Italy Collection', 27 September 2015, <https://www.theguardian.com/fashion/2015/sep/27/dolce-gabbana-shares-the-amore-in-milan-with-jolly-50s-italy-collection>.

<sup>14</sup> 'Italia Is Love. CAMPAGNA PUBBLICITARIA ESTATE 2016'.

<sup>15</sup> *Imagaries of Europe. Rethinking Identity, Belonging and Sovereignty Europe: From Hope to Disaffection*.

'others' or as flaws of globalisation, but understood as an essential part of Western hegemonies. Iain Chambers aptly captures this, seeing in migration neither an external event, nor an overflow of otherness onto European shores nor even a crisis, but rather 'the building block of European modernity'.<sup>16</sup>

The exclusion of the unwanted dead and live bodies washed up on the European shores is rooted in a dis:connective globalisation based on unequal power relations – management of the Mediterranean solely from the northern shores.<sup>17</sup>

Chambers pleads for a critical gaze towards the Occident and demands confrontation with unacknowledged histories that have shaped and continue to shape the 'Western archives'.<sup>18</sup> Grasping the past in the present<sup>19</sup> enables narration of the dis:connective Mediterranean, referring to neglected actors, artefacts and their practices, from other perspectives and with reference to other critical theories. The Portuguese postcolonial writer Hélia Correia finds a fitting image for this comprehension of past in the present when she speaks of Europe as a lady wearing *haute couture*, whose expensive dresses hide the body of a dirty, scabby and sick Europe.<sup>20</sup> Mediterranean imperialism, veiled under precious Dolce & Gabbana clothes, is exposed by snapshots of migrants off the same coast. The vaunted 'old values' – the Occidental humanistic definitions of locality, home, national identity, tradition and belonging – become worthless.

The point to remember is the fundamental importance of visual and haptic artefacts for the formation of images and meanings, as seen in the prototypes of a simultaneously connected and disconnected Mediterranean (body). Instead of the monolithic dualism in the Western construction of the self and 'other', the absent, so-called Mediterranean 'rest' is to be recalled. Its cultural and creative diversity as well as its indefinability according to dominating concepts can be traced through design practices dis:connected to and from the West.

Instead of the Eurocentric production of aesthetics and narratives, it is necessary to create a new framework in which the hegemonically perceived defectiveness, the deviant and the

16 Iain Chambers, *Postcolonial Interruptions, Unauthorised Modernities* (London: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2017), 37–60.

17 Lidia Curti, 'Diasporic Female Narratives: Crossing the Mediterranean, Rewriting Italy.' (Mediterranean Mediations with Iain Chambers and Lidia Curti, John Hope Franklin Humanities Institute at Duke University, 20 March 2019), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=czr5N4oFBAY&t=6846s>; Iain Chambers, 'Mediterranean Blues – Thinking with the Diver.' (Mediterranean Mediations with Iain Chambers and Lidia Curti, John Hope Franklin Humanities Institute at Duke University, 20 March 2019), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=czr5N4oFBAY&t=6846s>.

18 Chambers, *Postcolonial Interruptions, Unauthorised Modernities*.

19 Chambers, 'Mediterranean Blues – Thinking with the Diver.'

20 Hélia Correia, 'Portugal lesen!', Video, *3sat-Kulturdoku* (3sat, 19 March 2022), <https://www.3sat.de/kultur/kulturdoku/portugal-lesen-100.html>.

ambiguous of (Mediterranean) societies becomes susceptible to research and 'world-building' beyond nations.

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